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“An Analysis of Gay Characters in American Drama”

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Abstract

This project offers a possible analysis of American gay drama by taking its most representative characters as the focal point. A suggestion on a methodological approach for these characters is presented before the character analysis properly starts, so that readers are free to judge whether it should be applied to the rest of the plays belonging to this genre or not. It is also worth mentioning that some plays have not been subject to much previous critical analysis, which enriches the conclusion of this project. A special emphasis is put on how these characters represent the struggle of the gay individual with the homophobic society they belong to. Therefore, by observing how they cope with the heteronormative world, it is easier to frame and appreciate the gay identity. Finally, an understanding of this sexual identity is offered, paying significant attention to its long-denied, and still not granted, social place.

Keywords: *character analysis, American drama, gay plays, homophobia, gayness*

Resumen

Este proyecto ofrece un posible análisis del teatro gay americano, tomando sus personajes más representativos como punto central. Previo al análisis de dichos personajes, se sugiere una propuesta metodológica crítica, de manera que el lector pueda juzgar la validez de ésta para el resto de obras que pertenecen a este género. Cabe destacar que algunas de las obras seleccionadas apenas han estado sujetas al ojo crítico, lo que enriquece la conclusión de este proyecto. La lucha del individuo homosexual respecto a la sociedad homófoba a la que pertenece recibe un énfasis especial. Por ello, al observar cómo estos personajes lidian con un mundo heteronormativo, es más sencillo encuadrar y entender la identidad gay. Finalmente, se ofrece una visión acerca de esta identidad sexual, prestando especial atención al lugar social que le corresponde, aún por conceder.

Palabras clave: *análisis de personajes, teatro americano, obras gay, homofobia, gayness*

1. Introduction

There are two main reasons why this project is centered on American drama, and, more specifically, on analyzing gay characters. The first is academic, and finds its origins in my first reading of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Feeling captivated, fascinated, entranced by this masterpiece, I was tempted to explore the world of gay drama extensively. The second is personal, for it would have been incredibly more difficult – if not unfeasible – to dive into the depths of the selected characters if it had not been possible for me to empathize with them, having lived some of the experiences they stage. Therefore, I consider it essential to have explored how the community I belong to has evolved in terms of theatrical representation, and by extent, how the gay identity has been perceived and modeled over the years.

Gay plays have been subject of intensive study, so that critics have even established a relatively distinct literary canon. Although all criticism involving gay drama entail a fixation on the gay identity, few critics have attempted to rationalize the subject in search for a simplification, or rather, a schematized view, of this genre. American critic John M. Clum clearly stands out with his seminal work *Still Acting Gay*, which provoked and urged more critics, among which David Román, David Krasner, and Alan Sinfield should be highlighted. These I have taken as my reference, for their work on gay drama surely sets the basis of this critical trend.

The first hypothesis of this project is the multiplicity of possibilities when discussing on gayness. In other words, being gay does not mean to follow a strict pattern of behavior by means of which all gay people are to be recognized. This is materialized in the contents of this project, having selected a total sum of ten from an initial list of twenty-one plays. This selection has been done with extreme care since it is my intention to trace a logical progression from the first to the last play. As to methodology, it is needless to mention how exhaustively I have read in order to come up with fresh, new ideas and points of view present in every chapter. Bibliographic references, as well as numerous footnotes, should give the reader an overall impression of the reading phase, which has been previous, rarely parallel, to that of writing.

Logically, this hypothesis has suffered several modifications and transformations until its complete composition and development into a final thesis, plainly stated in §6. Though apparently rather long, a quick reading would reveal how this project is but a glimpse at such fascinating literary production. In all, this is a thorough, ambitious project which proves to be of contemporary interest to anyone concerned with, or curious about, the gay identity.

2. An outline of gay drama in the United States

In order to understand the reasons for the existence of theatrical productions by the gay community, it is necessary to trace back its origins. As gay drama very often stands on social and political grounds, I will outline the main events in the history of the United States that have marked the GLTBQ community¹. Also, this section offers a definition and a brief historical outline of gay drama, from which selected plays have been chosen. Finally, I will explain the reasons why these specific characters fit the purpose of the project.

2.1. McCarthyism, the Stonewall riots, gay pride, and the AIDS outbreak

Senator McCarthy had the leading role in what is commonly known as the Red Scare in the 1950s. But along with this witch-hunt for Communists, a similar one occurred for gay people. This extreme persecution, which receives the name of the “Lavender Scare”, implied that being suspected of being a homosexual was just as serious as being suspected of being a Communist (Toops 94-5, 104). The McCarthy era resulted in the conception of a dubious medical diagnosis which was quickly accepted by the heterosexual world. In 1967, Doctor Charles W. Socarides stated for the CBS Reports: “The average homosexual, if there is such, is promiscuous. Homosexuality is, in fact, a mental illness which has reached epidemiological proportions”².

Gay people were aware of the disapproving eye of society, so they started to frequent underground clubs and bars. But it was a matter of time that they fought for their rights, in a country where civil rights, black power, anti-war, and women movements were defining the 1960s as a revolutionary decade in terms of social changes (Matzner, web). The Stonewall Riots erupted in 1969 as a proof that there were gay liberationist cells everywhere, and they had something to fight for (De Jongh 88). The minority defied the police for over a week, the crowd being formed by several thousand people, yelling “Gay Power” and “We want freedom” (Carter, et al. 7).

After these sparks, the gay community set New York City on fire by parading a few weeks later – which eventually became an annual tradition. This not only brought more political power but also more sexual freedom, it being an essential means of homosexual empowerment, after decades of secret encounters (Sorrells 12). And together with this sexual freedom, there

¹ Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, Bisexual, and Queer community.

² This is a literal transcription taken from the documentary “The Homosexual” (1967), which is reproduced in *Stonewall Uprising*.

came the accusing eye of society in 1981, when “41 cases of a rare and often rapidly fatal form of cancer [which] presented no apparent danger to nonhomosexuals from contagion” (Altman, web) were finally announced. AIDS was present mostly in San Francisco and in New York City, and its devastating effects upon gay people caused the creation of a gay stereotype. They were thought to be the only carriers of this sickness, due to their supposedly devious, promiscuous nature. The highly-contagious men had to bear this prejudice despite AIDS was, and still is, spread mainly by heterosexual transmission (De Cock, et al. 1210).

It is this very counter-effect that truly marks the relationship between the homosexual and heterosexual worlds. The freedom that the former community had long waited for resulted both in gay pride, as a response to a heterosexist world that gives little space for other sexual inclinations, and in the fearful epidemic, which caused an enormous social prejudice. Thus, the Gay Liberation movement has sought to ignore the traditional public/private binary (Sinfield 239), though key events such as the AIDS outbreak still affect how the individuals belonging to this community are believed to be from the outside.

2.2. Most renowned playwrights

Homosexual characters can be found – or, at least, hinted – in older English drama, such as in Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1594), but in this project I will strictly focus only on gay characters, whose sexuality is openly shown to the audience³. No character in this project presents any doubt whatsoever about their sexuality, which makes them all suitable for being analyzed as proper gay characters.

So, the first landmark play that showed a gay character on stage did not present one but eight: Mart Crowley’s *The Boys in the Band* (1968). Opening just a year before Stonewall, its success meant a possibility for gay drama to be commercially viable. This entailed that other playwrights had more chances of writing gay plays without facing a predictable commercial disaster (Shewey xiii). A year later, Robert Patrick’s *The Haunted Host* predicted a massive creative writing that wished to explore this new genre, which first focused on “examinations of the larger questions of social marginalisation and exclusion” (Saddik 152). Among the first playwrights of gay drama, Lanford Wilson stands out, who examines the prejudices of modern

³ This is the reason why I will leave Tennessee Williams aside since his open homosexual characters are always off-stage – some of them dead. Out of this project I will also leave Edward Albee’s masterpiece *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), for critics still hold a discussion on a possible homosexual reading.

life in his early plays (Krasner 88). Doric Wilson should also be highlighted for representing the atmosphere on Christopher Street before the Stonewall Riots in *Street Theater* (1982).

Many playwrights then emerged, especially in the 80s, which could be considered as the most fructiferous decade for gay drama, when playwrights “set a tone of outrage toward a government that refused to acknowledge anything gay-related” (Krasner 140). It can be concluded that gay drama was written, mostly, by gay playwrights who found their place was Off-Broadway or even Off-Off-Broadway. Such was the case of Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982) or William Hoffmann’s *As Is* (1985). Broadway reserved its theaters for musicals like Fierstein’s *La Cage Aux Folles* (1983), but occasionally had space for greater plays, only when they proved they were really successful. Terrence McNally’s *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1994) is a perfect example since it was transferred from Off-Broadway to Broadway after running for a year. Similar to that, Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1993) debuted on Broadway after three different productions in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and London.

As to the scope of this project, the selected plays try to cover not only a wide time range (from 1968 to 1997) but also the three places of performance already commented, thus analyzing Broadway hits as well as Off-Off-Broadway productions.

2.3. Political, aesthetic, and social incorrectness: themes in gay drama

Gay drama could not exist without a radically demanding attitude. It is conceived as a means to vindicate everything the community asks for, and so the theater becomes the most suitable place for letting the voice of the minority be heard, whether by a heterosexual or homosexual society. Clearly, some productions can be labeled as “coterie” plays⁴, but there are also many others that penetrate the strong wall that divides both worlds, earning an undeniable fame, being *Angels in America* recognized as “the first play since *Streetcar* and *Death of a Salesman* to gain classic American status” (Sinfield 205). While the former type intends to create a sense of unity against heterosexism, the latter is more ambitious in trying to achieve power through social recognition.

The “incorrectness” that can be found in gay plays (e.g. naked actors or actual sex on stage) also points at serious social themes, for playwrights believe something must be done⁵. It

⁴ Clum points at the nature of these plays, which were written by homosexual playwrights for the GLBTQ community (2).

⁵ This Brechtian conception about how drama can change society is more than evident in Kushner’s *Angels in America*, in which the whole legacy of gay theater comes into play.

is a signal of rebellion, an inheritance from the pre-Stonewall era, in which ambiguity and discretion reigned (Sinfield 330). Gay people wanted to be noticed, and one of the best dramatic tools is an aesthetic differentiation. Therefore, playwrights attacked society and politics – and sometimes even religion – by behaving aesthetically revolutionary. Themes, then, are linked to this ultimate purpose, and so gay theater possesses a distinct style that makes it unique and easily identifiable. Gay plays can be thematically structured, as John M. Clum proposes:

This dramatic medium allows space for, in ascending order of importance: *display*, of the male body and of queer theatricality; *polemic*, some assertion of where we will not compromise with the mainstream; *self-examination* of ourselves as individuals and members of what is called the gay community; *transformation* through theatricality and irony of the representational and narrative forms which maintain our oppression; and *celebration* of our courage, resistance, and difference.” (*Still Acting Gay* xiii)

From my point of view, I believe these themes can be simplified so as to elaborate a coherent project without making it lose analytical depth. So, the three levels I intend to work on are the self, the partner, and the world. Though the great majority of plays are centered on two of these levels (the self and the world), some of the plays chosen attempt a thorough study and criticism for the three of them.

2.4. Selection of the most representative characters

Though it would appear logical to explore these three spheres separately, it is impossible since their intermingling is what actually constitutes the characters. So, this project follows a different thematic structure, one that in essence seems to be more superficial but that allows a deeper understanding of the gay identity bearing always in mind the three layers already exposed. For instance, an analysis of how different characters react to and behave because of AIDS will show whether gay people cared about their own health more than about their partner's, or if they were more worried about the way in which society was creating prejudices against them. Clearly, the characters that belong to this particular genre are constructed in a way that their emotional lives are used to take on political and social issues (Aronson 155), and that is why my analysis will be centered on these stances.

Gay drama is at its best whenever the community is in danger. This entails greater characters when there is something to fight for, and so, this project takes those characters that suit the following purposes: (1) to reject the heterosexist idea that *gayness* implies a fixed personality, thus assimilating that homosexuality is but a sexual preference, (2) to evaluate the effects of AIDS in America for the gay community, and (3) to explore the multiple ways in

which self-acceptance is achieved – if achieved at all –, and how it changes the relation with the immediate social environment. As a consequence, each of the parts either juxtaposes two characters or joins several characters' points of view in order to achieve a better understanding of the specific themes. My ultimate purpose, then, is to understand the many ways in which the gay identity is formed and accepted, as well as the influence it irremediably receives by the heteropatriarchal society from which it cannot escape.

3. Against stereotypes. Multiplicity of characterizations for gay characters

This section is centered on the analysis of characters that put into question how the gay individual interacts with the heteronormative social environment. The intended purpose is to demonstrate that it is impossible to categorize or label an individual only by his/her sexual orientation. Rather than a character being defined by his being gay, he is to be analyzed on the grounds of how they play with the apparently one-on-one relationship of gender and performance⁶. I will make use of two plays that portray the immense variety of gay characterizations so that, by analyzing particular characters, the previously-mentioned relationship will prove to be inadequate for the gay identity, and, as a consequence, a mistaken social strategy.

3.1. Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band*

As it always happens, context is essential to understand a play, especially if it is the case of a milestone play for the gay community. First performed one year before Stonewall (1968), *The Boys in the Band* bridges the “closet” era and the post-Stonewall liberation (Costa, 32). Quickly, the play became a representation of everything that gay people started to reject. The portrayal of the gay identity as one of infinite sadness because of an inability to cope with the outer world can be still perceived by some gay audiences as offensive: “You show me a happy homosexual, and I’ll show you a gay corpse” (Crowley 128). The question of how the community does not feel represented by such an important play could be easily answered by noticing the self-hatred present in all eight gay characters, which is brought about by Michael and his game, “Affairs of the Heart”⁷. However, it is not only the characters’ inability to proudly

⁶ Providing an exact definition for both terms is a hard task. It could be stated, though, that *performance* is connected to the idea of “roles created and defined outside oneself” (Clum 197). This can lead to negative representations and/or interpretations that may end up postulating that homosexuals are not men.

⁷ Crowley owes very much to Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* See Sarotte (142) and Clum (143-4; 148; 332) for notes on how intertextuality would suggest a reinterpretation of this masterpiece.

accept their sexuality what makes this play controversial but also many other elements which are subject of this study.

First of all, let us analyze how this play's characters represent what I believe to be the social aim of the play, that is, the implications of making society face eight gay characters that are so different one from each other. Were it not for the fact that sexual preference is no more than one other characteristic of a character, no conflict or substantial dialog would occur on stage. What this means is that the audience must face, for example, the possibility of a gay character who seems to be or live as a heterosexual. The play's first audiences had to accept the fact that homosexuality is but another element of what constitutes identity. In other words, by showing on stage gay characters that take their gayness in such radically different ways, the heterosexist audience is forced to assume the impossibility of defining an individual by their sexual stance. In my opinion, this social aim is the most salient feature of *The Boys in the Band*, the first "homosexual play, not a play about homosexuality" (Fierstein xvii).

Michael, together with Donald, are created with a strong reliance on psychoanalysis (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 186). The pun on their namesakes⁸ goes hand in hand with the excuses stated for the latter's sexuality: "Today I finally began to see how some of the other pieces of the puzzle relate to them [his parents], because failure is what I was taught at home." (Crowley 12) This turns Donald a dysfunctional individual in social terms, forever stricken by depression. As to the leading character, Michael, his immaturity is directly communicated by making explicit this psychoanalytic analysis: "[My mother] was determined to keep me a child forever... What you see before you is a thirty-year-old infant" (Crowley 15).

He functions as the – now forgotten – stereotypical homosexual who does not find his place in the gay community nor in society. An in-between, hateful character who has failed to acquire a useful role in the urban environment. This lets the heterosexist audience judge him as a social failure, and thus label all gay people as unmanly and sick (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 204). There is a notorious change in Michael's performance, which is marked by Alan's discovery of the sexual scenario, the play's turning point. His explaining the reasons for the initial distress he experiences about Alan finding out about his and his friends' sexuality is what activates a reasoning for his despicable behavior: "I was super-careful when I was in college and I still am whenever I see him. I don't know why, but I am" (Crowley 27). After Alan's realization,

⁸ Actually, Donald's father is called Walt (Crowley 11-2), which points at a Freudian reading of both Michael and Donald's "momism" (Costa 33).

Michael becomes the embodiment of all cruelty and malice gay people are supposed to bear in their true personality, from a homophobic point of view. This way, his efforts are devoted to dragging Alan into his sexual sphere, constantly plotting against his college friend's sexual freedom. Again, this matches with the prejudice for the homosexual, who seeks to turn everyone gay. But what his intention really demonstrates is his fear of rejection. As a matter of fact, his evil game is but a strategy to draw Alan to his same sexual field, so as to relate to him freely. In other words, Michael's self-hatred arises from the impossibility of finding personal acceptance if there is no social one.

Emory, "a camp queen"⁹ whose effeminacy is played on stage as a political reaction against the heteronormative (Costa 39), functions as the only character that rejects any oppression at all from the heteropatriarchal society. Despite the presence of the seemingly straight Alan and his declaration on how he "can't stand that kind of talk [and] his brand of humor" (Crowley 51), Emory keeps on alluding to a great number of iconic movies, plays, and singers for the gay community. In order to carry out this rejection, he uses a particular sort of humor, mainly based on exaggeration, to disguise the pain received from the gay social experience. Nothing could be more representative for this than his reaction at Alan's punch on his face: "I'm BLEEDING TO DEATH!" (Crowley 59). This humor is radically different from the one that had been attached to homosexuals before this play, thus affirming that the pathetic stereotypes typical of the mainstream theater did not correspond to the gay reality (Aronson 153). Closely linked to Emory there is Bernard, who is used to tackle the racial issue in a very subliminal way. That is so as he readily accepts his masochistic relationship with Emory, on the grounds that they both are members of marginalized groups (Costa 14). This entails Bernard as the victim and servant for the white heterosexual world, who can only find himself at ease in equal-to-equal relationships.

The next pair of characters is very much used to represent queer masculinities. Not only Hank's characterization as a "tall, solid, athletic, attractive" (Crowley 5) man rivals with the prefixed idea of what a homosexual is like but also his position in life¹⁰. As I see it, Hank is created for two purposes, and only intervenes when one of these two is present. One is the demonstration that a masculine performance is compatible with a homosexual man. This is proven by showing how masculinity is present both in Hank and Alan, two characters that share

⁹ Babuscio describes the term "camp" as "those elements in a person [that] express, or are created by, a gay sensibility [which shows] a relationship between activities, individuals, situations and gayness" (118-9).

¹⁰ For further details, please refer to the Appendix.

everything, differing only in their sexual stances (Costa 37). The second purpose is carried out by Hank and Larry together. Theirs is a rejection of the patriarchal family, by following a logical cause-consequence thinking. They are not a heterosexual couple, so they must not act as if they were. After all, if society is all about looking down on gay people, then it is fair to ask why they should adapt to its rules. Hank and Alan's way is rejecting monogamy, accepting that this new conception of a love relationship does not have to affect them. That way, they redefine the "traditional" couple and start their love compromise anew under these terms:

HANK: What kind of understanding do you want?

LARRY: Respect – for each other's freedom. With no need to lie or pretend. (Crowley 115)

As to Harold and Cowboy, I would like to focus on one certain moment of the play, particularly at the very end of Act One. That Cowboy is a crude reflection of the American gay hustler is evident, but despite his apparently comic function, he is the one in charge of the most scandalous visual element of the play: a kiss. Strange as it may seem, the audience confronts this kiss between two men as something outrageous, even more than Alan's violence, which is natural, normal, and justified (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 18). Cowboy's kiss causes a reasonable reaction in Harold: clumsy laughter for the unexpected sign of affection from a complete stranger. The sound of his laughs close the first act, making the heterosexist audience feel absolutely uncomfortable. More than ever, the play can be regarded as a freak show; its characters are judged by the outsider, who ends up concluding they are extremely weird, alone, and unhappy because of their sexuality (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 204).

These eight characters have been greatly criticized both by critics and the gay audience, but, from my point of view, American gay drama owes its existence and development to Crowley's creation. Whether they are stereotypes or a cry for an erasure of the simplistic "gay" label will depend on the eyes of the audience. Today, I cannot consider them as flat characters, but as vivid representations of a disregarded, deeply hated suburban community. The multiplicity of characterizations I have analyzed explores the way in which gender, sexuality, and performance conform the gay identity. Of course, the departure of these characters is the same: they cannot relate to the world because they hate themselves. However, two of them do break free from all heteronormative social strings and thus expand their horizons onto the partner and the world: "I do love him. And I don't care who knows it" (Crowley 108). For all these reasons, I consider *The Boys in the Band* a truthful reflection of the many possibilities existent in the gay identity, a valid dramatic start for staging how different the heterosexual and

the homosexual worlds are, a real-to-life show about “the experience of being gay as seen from the inside” (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 160).

3.2. Terrence McNally’s *Love! Valour! Compassion!*

It is most peculiar that twenty-eight years after the first production of *The Boys in the Band*, the American stage encounters another gay play that borrows so many plot elements from Crowley’s work. Once again, eight gay characters meet in the house of one of them in three special days. This time, all of them find in the cast a lover, a boyfriend, or a husband. It is their relationships what constructs the community, creating a comfortable domestic atmosphere (Dolan 497). In this complex play, the characters aim at the same longed social recognition, but in a radically different way. While the self-flagellant boys in the band denied any possibility of happiness, McNally’s characters create a family and show they are functioning professionals capable of love, not being crippled by their homosexuality (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 270-1).

Let us analyze them the same way as before, so that their emotional links and reasons behind their behavior remain clear. Gregory is the only character with whom all the rest are somehow connected, whether by his artistic influence or by a more affective bond. He proudly presents his house to the audience, and acts as the link between the rest of the characters and us. They are clearly split into two generations, and often make allusions to age when relating to each other. Gregory stands in the middle of these two groups, at least initially, being able to sympathize with both of them (Román 255). In a very sarcastic way, Gregory’s linguistic handicap makes him unable to express himself openly. This is only possible in two particular scenarios. One is the private sphere, where he shows his partner, by speaking fluently, that his love for him is so powerful that he can ignore his infidelity. The second is the artistic sphere, in which McNally describes him in a stage direction as “an entirely different person when he moves: free, spontaneous, as physically fluent as he is verbally inhibited” (McNally 58). Therefore, as he is incapable of linking the two generations together by means of speech, he secures the community through his art, which is dancing. By favoring Ramon in his artistic career, Gregory understands dance as the best tool for the gay community to maintain queer culture. He knows that gay people lack institutional or ideological structures that secure the subculture (Román 255), so he steps forward and chooses dancing as the best expression of the self. This way, the old generation leads the way for the younger, finding their place “out front. Watching” (McNally 128).

When it comes to his partner, Bobby, it is easier to be analyzed by taking the following key quotation as the departure point:

BOBBY: Imagine your whole life being a children's birthday-party game!

JOHN: Painful, erotic, and absurd. (McNally 43)

Indeed, Bobby's behavior can be easily labeled as childish and irrelevant to the whole of the play, were it not for his involvement in the sexual encounter that opens it up. He is shown as dependent on Gregory for absolutely everything, even echoing his thoughts and beliefs: "Gregory says a dancer's body is the scars of his dancing" (McNally 77). There is a continuous interest in showing this character as the weakest of them all, creating surreal, though comic, moments in which he falls off the stage, thrusts through the dark of night with his arms wide open, and cries for Gregory's help to get up after another fall, the rest of the characters looking down in embarrassment. However clumsy and vulnerable, he is the only one who makes love to Ramon. The reasons behind this infidelity have to do, in my humble opinion, more with the playwright's plot design than with an interest in a deep characterization. This is so because it is the shadow of Bobby's sexual affair that keeps the play working on. Personally, I do believe that the only major thing this conflict brings about in terms of characterization is the rise of the good values this play promotes. That is, the "depiction and celebration of the links of love, loyalty, and patronage that are forged in gay society" (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 275).

Bobby's one-night crush, Ramon, is exotic, wild, untamable, reckless, and masculine. His straight acting immediately places him as a moral and cultural antagonist to whom everyone is attracted to because of his physical appearance and his Latino bloodline: "I don't know what you're talking about half the time... We used to beat up people like you where I grew up" (McNally 93). One would have to be blind not to fix their eyes on his naked body, which is shamelessly exhibited for a long time so many times. The presence of this extremely attractive character seeks to evoke the audience's reaction to *The Boys in the Band*'s kiss, one of disgust, even horror, from a homophobic society. The funny thing is that after so many years, it is still considered as a provocation to show the naked body of a gay character. Ramon is the living proof that the gay gaze, as Clum likes to call it, is still a taboo subject for society¹¹. But this character is not merely a great body; he is aware of the generational cleavage present in the house: "You're old and you're scared and you don't know what to do about it... I'm young and

¹¹ He devotes great part of the opening of his seminal work *Still Acting Gay* to the theatrical power of the gay body (7-8; 10-26), in which he states that "the continuing shock value of open demonstrations of homosexual affection or desire shows not only the continuity of heterosexism but also the theatrical principle that bodies contain the greatest potential danger for a contemporary audience." (7)

I'm not scared and I'm coming after you" (McNally 118). He also knows the reason why the gay community, encapsulated in this summer house, has not found a proper place in society, which makes him a little less stupid, after all: "We don't love one another because we don't love ourselves" (McNally 54). Definitely, Ramon represents this new generation by means of his laid-back, temperamental, fierce, sometimes aggressive personality.

At the other extreme, Arthur and Perry correspond to the older generation. As their relationship is based on more traditional grounds, they can be treated as products of the inevitable mark of a heteropatriarchal society. Thus, they constantly declare the importance of not losing such values as fidelity, commitment, and maturity, which "represent a generational norm" (Román 253). That is, they disregard everything that falls out from those categories, from Bobby's and Ramon's causal sexual encounter to some characteristics of gayness: "Men in drag turn my stomach" (McNally 48). As a matter of fact, Arthur lectures the new generation, Bobby and Ramon, for what they have done, as well as Perry responds to Ramon's presence in a xenophobic manner: "A Third World boyfriend" (McNally 25). Despite the fact that Perry introduces himself as the evil one, Arthur hardly ever excuses his dark humor or his lack of respect. Their social implication is as stuck as their emotional bond, in which they stick together simply because they feel they have to. This entails that their relationship with the world is that of stagnation, for they cannot find any hope for the gay community: "What is wrong with this country? They hate us. They fucking hate us. They've always hated us. It never ends, the fucking hatred" (McNally 107).

Parallel to this generational cohabitation, the playwright develops a subplot in which two HIV-positive characters, Buzz and James, fall in love. As McNally "attempts to place his characters in a framework of canonical gay drama" (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 268-9), AIDS could not be absent. This theme is hurriedly introduced by Buzz, who warns his friends: "That's five dollars. Anyone who mentions AIDS this summer, it'll cost them" (McNally 24). And although all eight characters refuse to verbalize their thoughts on the fatal sickness, the theme is developed in a very subtle manner. At times, even metaphorically, by staging Buzz and James paddling in the summer lake, both in the same boat. On another boat, in the distance, feeling uneasy about their eventful encounter, are Arthur and Perry, both HIV-negative¹². But Buzz is much more than a simple excuse for discussing AIDS onstage; his camp talking is at its best

¹² If readers take into account the repetitive use of the word "bystander" by the unaffected couple, or the confusion of the words "race" and "grace" (McNally 122-3), this scene is absolutely self-explanatory: what is represented here is the impossibility of communication between the two sides marked by AIDS.

when alluding to musicals, which he uses as the most useful tools to escape from reality: “If this were a musical... it would have a happy ending” (McNally 130-1). Happy ending or not, what Buzz and James’s relationship reminds the audience is that people with AIDS can have fulfilling lives in any sphere, be it romantic, social, or sexual (Román 250).

As to James, he is mainly used for the recently explained theme. However, his connection with his twin brother John is evident. Their surname, Jeckyll, suggests the binary structures forever present in the play. It is the same actor who gives life to the two characters, who could not be more opposite to each other. While James is young, kind, able to love, HIV-positive, and dies happy, John is older, hated, HIV-negative, and unable to feel any affection that transcends the sexual, dies alone.

To analyze these characters properly, it is compulsory to refer to the tragicomic flash forward which the play ends with. For one thing, the generational struggle I have commented on comes to the surface. When asked if it was for Gregory’s age that Bobby left him, he simply answers: “Yes” (McNally 138). For other thing, the way in which Buzz describes his own future death stands in opposition to Ramon’s idealistic conception that he will live forever thanks to his art, for the death of the young, in dramatic literature, usually symbolizes the death of the community (Román 256).

Not alive but neither dead, the eight characters talk to the audience in a most Brechtian manner. This facilitates a defamiliarization which makes the audience treat them as characters, instead of people. Whether they are, then, regarded as old stereotypes or as valid allegories, it will depend on the receiver. Sure, the eight of them are staged on a remarkable insularity from the heterosexual world, but this separateness does not prevent their social functionality since they are professional and metropolitan individuals (Sinfield 323). This does not even stop them from dancing together, an exercise that requires precision and teamwork and that shows the positive way in which the gay community interrelate, as family (Dolan 497; Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 273). What I think could be learned from the analysis of these two plays is that the creation of stereotypes is another way of labeling a greater group, thus recognizing such group is much more complex than it seemed in an earlier stage. To categorize any of these characters as stereotypes is, in my humble opinion, a proof of the latent heteronormativity still present.

4. The gay community and AIDS

This chapter will explore how AIDS has affected American gay drama. The selected characters will show this disease to be considered as a morally complex phenomenon in which

the body is a direct source of experience that affects the shifting identities of these characters (Saddik 174). Two of the chosen plays, *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*, are considered the first ones to take AIDS on stage to treat the epidemic on emotional, physical, and social grounds, thus realizing that in the public sphere what it mattered most was political power (Román 20; 44). Both are clearly directed to the heteropatriarchal middle-class audience, in that they depict the mainstream society's and government's refusal to react to the disease (Aronson, 154; Krasner 140). *Jeffrey*, a comedy on such a delicate topic, *Jerker*, a seriocomic play that glances at the consequences of gay sexual liberation, and *A Language of Their Own*, a rather unexplored play that also adds race to the cocktail, are the other AIDS plays that belong to this particularly formulated genre.

4.1. A bloody political fight: Ned Weeks from Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*

This play, which is considered an autobiography by all critics, focuses on the characterization of Ned Weeks as a theatrical extension of the author. Kramer's political action is staged and told by his most famous character, and so his political conscience tries to find its way into the audiences (Rich, Web). He is all for convincing about the need of eliminating the social prejudice that resorted to automatically connect homosexuality with the fatal disease: "The single-minded determination of all you people to forever see us as sick helps keep us sick" (Kramer 45). This link would also entail various negative connotations for the gay community, such as deviance, promiscuity, or inability to love¹³. No doubt this persona regards the very gay people as the originators of the epidemic, suggesting that only "a domestication of gay sexuality in the heteronormative model" (Román 62) would provide a long-term solution. This implies that any gay American affected with AIDS is to be blamed for his own and others' sickness, as a consequence of rebelling against the heteropatriarchal structures: "More sex isn't more liberating. And having so much sex makes finding love impossible" (Kramer 39).

The emphasis, then, is put on strict monogamy and marriage. As a matter of fact, Ned and Felix marry just before the latter's death, as a proof that the only repercussion of a self-destructive behavior (namely, promiscuous sexual encounters) is loneliness (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 63; "A Culture That Isn't Just Sexual" 187). Of course, this immediately makes the hero's

¹³ A close reading, however, reveals a reflection on masculinities: "Men do not just naturally not love – they learn not to. I am not a whore. I just sometimes make mistakes and look for love in the wrong places" (Kramer 33). Kramer does try to depict a gay community that is able to proliferate care and love for each other, though no character reaches a state of love happiness when the curtain closes.

friends the antagonists, for their lifestyle seems incoherent without the sexual freedom they fought for so hard:

NED. You make it [promiscuity] sound like that's all that being gay means.

BRUCE. That's all it does mean!

MICKEY. It's the only thing that makes us different. (Kramer 36-7)

Ned's friends' reactions to his radical ideas on sexuality and AIDS contrast with his brother's. Ben can hold a civilized discussion on homosexuality as long as Ned's arguments adopt a homophobic view of the gay community. And even if Ned does not stray from this way of thinking, he will refuse to help since his prejudices do not allow him to believe his gay brother: "You guys don't seem to understand why there are rules, and regulations, guidelines, responsibilities. You guys have a dreadful image problem" (Kramer 45).

After a chain of closed doors on Ned's face, he proceeds to utter one of the most famous monologs in gay American drama. In it, he calls for the recognition of "a culture that isn't just sexual" (Kramer 87), and so he conforms gay plays as ones that posit "the right to love, not the right to sex, as the stake in the battle against oppression" (Clum, "A Culture That Isn't Just Sexual" 170). By means of listing an extensive number of gay artists, leaders, and heroes, Kramer's Ned's words are bound to resonate in the ears of any straight man or woman, forcing them to admit the importance and presence homosexuality has had over the centuries. This vindication is masterly placed on the literary text, for its realistic setting and characters aim at the creation of a *pathos* common in early AIDS plays, out of a characteristic dramatic tension based on the characters' frail existence¹⁴. This way, *The Normal Heart* attempts to stage the reality that anyone could be HIV-positive, "enhancing the anxiety and sense of inevitability already experienced by gay men in daily life" (Román 237).

In all, Ned Weeks cannot be categorized as a homophobic character, nor as an extreme radical because of his claims on sexuality. Instead, his goal in the play is a direct reflection of the author's social mission: to fight¹⁵. For all these reasons, I consider Ned Weeks a well-off member of a heteronormative society who refuses to detach himself from its rules, in a desperate effort to obtain some health and social fixity for the community he belongs to.

4.2. Loving obscenity: J.R. from Robert Chesley's *Jerker*

¹⁴ Larry Kramer declared for *The Times*: "I want to make people cry" (Morley, Web).

¹⁵ Ned's speeches recur to semantic families of "fight" and "support" over twenty times in the dramatic text. He "can't understand why people can't fight" when he is doing so "constantly" (Kramer 51), seeks "strange support from the straight world for something gay" (23) and falls to his knees to cry out: "Why didn't I fight harder!" (95)

This controversial play is actually a response to Kramer's utopian ideas on how gay people would be easily accepted thanks to the institution of marriage. In this play, Chesley mixes erotica with death, creating an incredibly bizarre drama that rejects not only realism but also the political devices associated with Brechtian Theater (Román 55). Thus, J.R. constantly plays with sex and death, celebrating sexual freedom while lamenting the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic.¹⁶

The very name of the character to be analyzed already suggests some connection with the military. J.R.'s involvement in war affairs makes it impossible for him to understand the *otherness* the gay community is suffering because of the fatal syndrome. His traumas come to the surface as the play develops, while the horrible experiences lived while he fought for the same country that denies him stand as the excuse for his fetishes:

I know, I saw what... 'immoral' means ... And that's why nobody but nobody tells me I'm immoral if I love a man ... Something in me knows that, knows that it's just the exact opposite of the evil I've seen. (Chesley 475)

After many, many calls in which J.R. shows his erotic creativity, he first finds an emotional link with his lover on the phone when overcoming the social stigma that points at gay sexual liberation as the cause of the epidemic, exclaiming that "there's nothing wrong with that!" and making clear that he doesn't "regret a single moment of it: not one" (Chesley 474-5). From this moment – when J.R. feels understood by his casual lover – onwards, the phone calls tend to leave the pornographic content aside, enabling both characters to hold more substantial conversations in which their psyches are revealed. The audience learns J.R. does regret about AIDS, but cannot help looking for the comfort obtained by sexual intercourse, which for him is the only way of loving he has been provided with: "I guess it was the affection I wanted. And you know? I think that is still basically it, still what I want the most" (Chesley 484).

Still, it should not be forgotten that these two characters only engage telephonically, for their only real encounter takes place before the play, and they do not even get to exchange a word. This particular sort of communication reminds of the gay social position, which is one of isolation. The play's setting resembles two bubbles, each lamenting the lack of the gay place. It is only through the telephonic connection that the two characters can feel somewhat accepted

¹⁶ After all, this chilling mix is explained by the play's title, in which its shocking fusion of genres is explicitly claimed: *Jerker, Or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and A Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*.

and loved, as the author suggests in a stage direction: “They both are smiling, feeling their connection” (Chesley 472). Again, loneliness stands out as a major theme in a gay play, this time depicted by a character that wishes nothing but the slightest form of affection: “I just wanna lie here and listen to you, ‘cause I’ve been alone all day” (Chesley 484). Like in many other plays¹⁷, death reinforces this theme by making one of the two lovers die, inevitably leaving the other lamenting his sudden disappearance. J.R. reserves his “I... I love you, please call” (Chesley 491) until the very end, while Judy Garland is being played on the background. The fact that this artist, an incredibly powerful gay icon, sings “Do it Again” at this very moment hints that sex is literally deadly, though at the same time “it is affirmed in the face of death: the AIDS virus offers anything but guilt, regret, and a rejection of his [J.R.’s] own experience” (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 60-1).

Surely, the most scandalous phone call is the one in which J.R. exposes his pedophilia. Treating his distant lover as his little brother, he plays rough on him in the middle of a forest, almost reaching sodomy. However, I cannot consider this a praise for illegal sexual practices but a metaphoric understanding of an inability to engage with same-sex partners. This is so because, later on, J.R. defines himself and his lover as “two young princes ... walking through the beautiful forest”, encountering “a beautiful man, without age, smiling.” It is then when they “know [they] are safe at last ... and each adventure ... was a lesson on [their] journey to the palace” (Chesley 485-6). From my point of view, this man, with his perfect physical features, embodies the impossible gay partner, one that cannot be met in real life because of social oppression. The adventures are every hardship on the forest, whose function is but to represent the idyllic scenario of social recognition: “we ourselves were lessons for others whose paths crossed ours in the Forest” (Chesley 486).

J.R. does not only stage loneliness caused by the sudden death of an almost unknown lover. He does not only praise sexual freedom, getting rid of any sort of prejudice against repressive labels such as “deviate”, “sick”, and “unmanly”¹⁸. He also replies to Kramer’s sociopolitical ideology, making the theatrical sphere suitable for the representation of the

¹⁷ Also set in the 1980s, Ronnie Larsen’s *Making Porn* (1995) has retaken the dramatic structure of *Jerker*, both plays opening with a heavy sexual content, later balanced by an anti-climax in which AIDS strikes and nearly half the characters die.

¹⁸ J.R.’s masculinity is very much connected with his military background. At times, his extremely masculine way of understanding a gay sexual intercourse leaves *The Boys in the Band*’s kiss as a mere triviality: “If I love a man, if I love a hundred men in one night: if I love sucking ass, if I love licking boots, if I love taking piss from a guy’s cock, or if I have a quickie blowjob in the Union Square men’s room: all that is good - really, truly, basically good” (Chesley 475).

multiplicity of perspectives evident and necessary with the reality of AIDS (Román 68). Personally, I believe J.R. depicts how American society took gay, HIV-positive people into consideration. Even though he looks rough and abnormally strange in his sexual and social behavior, at his core there only exists a profound wish to love, a right that has been denied to him. His sexual fantasies do not make him a pervert, but rise his “affectional fantas[ies]” (Chesley 484) to the surface.

4.3. Sexual fear

In this section, I will look at five characters that relate to AIDS in such a different fashion that they deserve a special place in the project. What defines all of them, as the title suggests, is their phobia to anything related to the epidemic, which later translates into social and cultural mismatches with both the heterosexual and the homosexual world.

4.3.1. Jeffrey from Paul Rudnick’s *Jeffrey*

The analysis of this character should depart from the notion that the play which it belongs to is a comedy. Hence, Jeffrey is a comic character, and as such, his way of addressing AIDS is to be understood from a different perspective than other mainstream, political plays. I am not suggesting the character is not created with a heavy political stance. Rather, it is the particular way in which Jeffrey modifies his private sphere as a reaction to the multiple discourses concerning AIDS that makes this character so interesting to be analyzed.

Jeffrey’s sexual fear makes him give up any type of sexual intercourse, “in response to ten years of the AIDS crisis, the frustrations of safe sex, and the dementia of romance in general” (Rudnick vii). Jeffrey, “as all human beings, [is] obsessed with sex” (Rudnick 7), but the different discourses present in his society makes him unable to accept sex if it is not carefree. The actual conflict of this character is not his celibacy, but his difficulty in maintaining it when falling in love with an HIV-positive man. At this point, the simple but innovative characterization turns to question whether it is possible to success in mixing AIDS and love: “How could I love someone, and watch that happen?” (Rudnick 67). In order to keep his solemn vow, the play centers on Jeffrey as the main experiencer of multiple, diverse vignettes in which satires on both heterosexual and homosexual representations find their way into the comicalness of the whole show (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 237). Interesting for this project, however, are the symbolic settings by means of which the New Yorker gay institutions are criticized, such as the gym, self-help groups, or masturbation groups.

For instance, Jeffrey's contact with both sexual worlds usually entail a reflection on masculinities together with gayness: "I don't know why I'm doing that [going to the gym]. I guess it's to seem sexier – you know, more masculine" (Rudnick 9). Personally, what I find most interesting about this character is his radically quick ability to change his mind. If, at the beginning of the play, he exclaims: "I love sex. I don't know how else to say it" (Rudnick 7), at the end of the first act he shouts: "I hate sex! I hate love! I hate the world for giving me everything, and then taking it all back!" (Rudnick 48). Clearly, Jeffrey is emotionally lost, and thus finds it impossible to make such a decision. He forbids himself one of the most basic and necessary elements for a gay individual in the 20th century: "We're not allowed to have fantasies! Not anymore!" (Rudnick 27). This way, he becomes too concerned about the real experience, to a point of unbearable anguish and anxiety. He is characterized, from my point of view, in a way that allows the audience to laugh at every intervention while he is constantly showing his fright. This materializes, to provide an example, in his non-stop excuses, as a sign of low self-esteem: "I'm sorry – no, I'm sorry I said I'm sorry! I'm sorry you're sick! And I'm sorry I lied! I'm sorry it's not ten years ago, and I'm sorry that life is suddenly... radioactive!" (Rudnick 48).

Jeffrey's final resolution is the one to be expected from a comedy: social tension is resolved through laughter and by the sweet taste of love's fulfillment, resulting in a happy ending (Román 247), maybe too stretched and simplistic. Aware of this critique on the play's ending as a bland, dull one, the author provides Jeffrey with some symbolic props that are intended to communicate that hope is the best medicine for AIDS. By not letting the red balloon touch the ground, Jeffrey implies his willingness to support his lover even in death. Finally, he makes his other half "promise [him]" that he would never get sick and die, and after his lover's answer, "Never", Jeffrey responds, very emotional, "Liar" (Rudnick 88).

Sure, it is not easy to feel at ease with a comedy on such a delicate topic as AIDS is. Many critics argue its purposelessness, as well as Jeffrey's characterization as a homophobe inside the homosexual world, due to the fact that he has to overcome an internal struggle to accept a HIV-man's love, so that only when he does so, can he become a "good" member of the community (Sinfield 320). That Jeffrey's celibacy is not a usual practice among gay people is clear (Román 242), but still this is where all the comic substance lies on. To sum it all up, Jeffrey is a character whose inner world is at war with itself. This is not a random occurring, but a result of the many discourses that shaped AIDS at the time. His ethics are questioned and

finally approved by the condescending spectator, to whom Jeffrey directs a straightforward message of love as the best enemy for AIDS.

4.3.2. Saul and Rich from William Hoffman's *As Is*

When analyzing these characters, one must bear in mind that, for some critics, this is a paradigmatic play of how AIDS changed the world (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 56), while for many others this is one of the greatest AIDS dramas, for it marks the beginning of education on an epidemic (Shewey xxiii; Krasner 140; Aronson 154) that was already affecting the whole of the American society, that which responded with silence and indifference. The main reason why this play is usually regarded as *the* AIDS play is, in my opinion, the way in which utilizes the two main characters here proposed for analysis. As I see it, Rich and Saul are allegorical characters who embody the two halves in which the gay community was split up.

Thus, Rich becomes the Person With AIDS who has to face the immediate negative response to his sickness from the mouths of family members, friends, lover, and businessmen (Sinfield 317). His body is perceived as a deserved punishment from sexual perversion, constantly repelled by anyone who belongs to the “correct” sexuality: “My co-workers asked me to leave. They were afraid of contracting AIDS through the air, or by my looking at them” (Hoffman 531). For obvious reasons, this absolute rejection affects Rich in the most profound conception of his identity, coming to believe that his body is the (im)perfect reflection of himself, hence accepting the social stigma he is victim of: “Don’t touch me!” (Hoffman 511). As a consequence, Rich cannot simply find meaning to his life, and so he is given one of the most powerful interventions, though of an apparently simple nature: “I don’t care” (Hoffman 513)¹⁹. The very fact that he cannot accept himself makes it impossible for him to appeal to his partner: “I don’t want your love!” (Hoffman 514). Not opposite but parallel to Rich, there is Saul, the partner of the Person With AIDS.

Saul is the embodiment of that other half of the gay community, those gay men who had to face the dilemma of remaining with their lovers despite their sickness or running away. In this case, Saul does both. The reasons for his escaping from the sexual fear that dominates such a relationship are connected with the couple’s life position. Their divorce lets us see the division of the spoils, which demonstrate they both are affluent professionals that participate in a world

¹⁹ It is incredibly curious to examine how this sentence has been put to use by gay playwrights after this play opened in 1985. Kushner’s *Angels in America* retakes it, employing it to illustrate how the gay individual is truly affected from the accusing eye of society.

of grand consumption, art, parties, and taste; a hedonism that is radically destroyed by the epidemic (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 57). Saul's ethics do not, however, allow him to abandon him, so they enter in a spiral of memories by means of which their marriage is not only retold but also made sense of. This recounting calls for "individual therapy" (Sinfield 317) for any member of the audience suffering from AIDS, as well as it helps to build up the notion of domesticity as the first step to be taken in order to face the sickness²⁰. Because of these memories, Saul and Rich find the way to be reunited, and how they show their decision is more than peculiar.

Nonetheless, let us focus first on some interesting reactions towards these memories, which take the theatrical form of "dissolving scenes" (Shewey xxv). Thanks to them, a whole scenario of sexual liberation is displayed, so as to evaluate both characters' opinions on whose fault it is that Rich has become the Person With AIDS. After a parade of gay clones²¹ and other easily identifiable sexual elements from the urban gay night life, both Rich and Saul reach to the conclusion that it is useless to look for someone to blame. While AIDS is lamented and sex is not, Rich still finds it inconceivable to find pride in his sexuality. Therefore, Rich moves from feeling guilty about contracting the sickness to feeling that way for being a homosexual:

I never felt good about being gay [...] Gay was grim. It was something I did because I had to.
Like a dope fiend needs his fix. It always left me feeling like shit afterward. And that's the truth.
I felt guilty. I still feel that way. (Hoffman 531)

One of the main goals of this project, as explained in §2.3, is to analyze gay characters taking into account the three levels by means of which I believe they are constructed: the self, the partner, and the world. I explained in that chapter how the gay individual will only be able to relate to the latter level once the other two are in harmony. In this occasion, Rich does demonstrate the validity of this theory, for it is only when Saul comes back to him that he can accept himself. Henceforth, the play's message operates through Rich, whose take on AIDS signifies a representation of the Person With AIDS as "a sexually viable partner and a desiring subject worthy of pleasure without shame", not as "a diseased pariah" (Román 59-60). As a matter of fact, the two main characters end up making love in a hospital bed, after a moving speech that tries to alter commonly shared thoughts towards suicide as AIDS' only solution. In

²⁰ According to what Clum states in his seminal work *Still Acting Gay*, it is Rich's realization that Saul's "domesticity and kvetching" are what he needs that makes them find the way to be together again.

²¹ The phenomenon of the gay clones first started in the mid-70s, partly influenced by the exploitation of the gay urban life by the sex industry. These clones were characterized by "little mustaches; very short haircuts; plaid flannel shirts, boots, denim or leather jackets; a particular repertoire of movements, sounds, facial expressions, drug taking, and sexual practices" (Lauritsen 223).

all, Rich and Saul not only come to terms with their past without guilt or regret, (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 58), but also urge the audiences to make the peace with oneself and with the partner, as the only way to overcome the fearful epidemic.

4.3.3. Oscar and Ming from Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*

As if staging gay characters affected by AIDS were not enough, Chay Yew's theater selects HIV-positive Asian gay characters, adding a considerably important element to be analyzed. In the case of the characters discussed here, both are assimilated in the American culture. They are, as Román likes to call them in his *Performance in America*, "hyphenated Americans", as they live at "the intersection of multiple and overlapping worlds: Asia and America" (85). This defines both Oscar and Ming as two in-between characters, not only on sexual but also on racial and cultural grounds.²²

They are absolutely aware of their belonging to both cultures and none at the same time, which typifies them as truly unique characters in the history of gay drama: "Once I started speaking English, I stopped learning how to speak and write Chinese. I dropped my culture for another" (Yew 174).²³ This cultural and racial issue is notably meaningful when equated to the way Oscar and Ming relate to AIDS. In other words, racial, sexual, cultural, and health difference are but secondary elements that *surround* these characters. They define them to a certain extent, but it is their "inherent contradictions in communication" (Reynolds 77) what truly sets the rhythms of their singularly moving love story.

Nonetheless, their sexual fear towards AIDS is more than evident: "All of a sudden, I couldn't bare his touch" (Yew 140). Their relationship is based on the grounds of mutual cultural understanding, as Oscar acknowledges: "The only thing that truly binds us together is being Chinese" (Yew 132). Their breakup is catalyzed not only by Oscar suffering from AIDS but also by Ming's serostatus (Román 258)²⁴. This seals their end as a couple, as well as it gives way to their finding their voices "simultaneously dependent on and at a distance from one another" (Reynolds 77). In a similar way as Ming found out about his sexuality, both men must

²² Their cultural assimilation is something achieved out of a process which already marks them as the Others of their native culture. Ming explains the way in which his assimilation occurred. Notice how his path to the American culture revealed his sexuality: "I finally did speak English just like everyone else, if not better. I think My Fair Lady was pivotal in my life. It told me how to speak proper English, appreciate good clothes, and made me realize I was gay" (Yew 131).

²³ Surprisingly, they use racism as an empowering weapon, particularly useful when attempting to harm the other: "So what do you do with your evenings together? Practice English?" (Yew 213).

²⁴ This does not stop Ming from this sexual fear: "I don't know why you keep ramming the words AIDS and HIV positive down my throat. It's like you're almost fucking proud to wear the label around your neck. I hate it. I hate it" (Yew 139).

now learn how to express to the audience certain emotions forbidden, or not even conceived, by the language and culture in which they were raised (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 294). It is exactly this issue that governs the complex development of both characters, for they find themselves speaking to the audience more than to each other. They do lack a particular sort of communication, a language of their own that enables them to engage and make themselves understood. Instead, they “become two awkward strangers in a cold room. Wrestling with a new unspeakable language that belongs only to old lovers” (Yew 160).

Partly, the reasons behind this unknown communicative interaction is caused by the persistence of AIDS in Oscar’s body. After breaking up and finding a new partner each, Ming is tormented by his decision, and feels he has abandoned his former lover. This is why he simply cannot break the communicative barrier and recurs to dubious strategies of empathy, charged with an unquestionable racism: “[Me] Jealous? Of that little Vietnamese boat person?” (Yew 199). On the other side, Oscar suffers a claustrophobic moment of sudden anxiety, trapped in a furniture store and surrounded by homophobic Americans: “People looking at me. Concerned. Curious... Children laughing. Pointing their fingers at me ... I wanted to die ... I started crying” (Yew 194-5). He does not receive much psychological help from his new partner either, who keeps on saying that “It’s très difficult to live with someone who’s HIV positive. Très, très, très high maintenance” (Yew 184). In the end, Oscar’s disease gets worse and causes his somewhat expected death, still keeping his wish of “not let[ting] the disease pry [them] apart” (Yew 183).

Ming hears about his ex-lover’s death from the telephone, again remarking the existent difficulties in communication. His reaction is one of obvious despair and astonishment, causing a momentous state of mind that makes him mutter: “We always have such nice words for terrible things” (Yew 223). But Ming does not perceive any real, physical stimuli for a longish time after this utterance. He becomes the protagonist of a lucid daydream by means of which, in a state of semi-consciousness, he purges all his regrets and griefs about his relationship with Oscar. It is then when the main theme of the play is most visible, that of the language of love that lovers fail to communicate (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 293). Their apologetic farewell leaves a bitter aftertaste when linked to the usual political and social message of AIDS plays.

I personally believe that Oscar and Ming’s late achievement in communicating effectively does not imply a pessimistic view on the epidemic issue. Rather, the audience is encouraged to develop, or create, that new language for new lovers, by staging what could happen if this communication is never accomplished. These two characters make *A Language*

of *Their Own* an especially powerful, intimate, “poetic play” (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 285) that exploits the theatricality of contemporary drama through a deeply intricate characterization. The exceedingly complex web woven between the four leading characters sure is worthy more pages than critics have considered so far, and surely more than I have devoted to catch a glimpse of the “intimate but compelling attraction” (Reynolds 78) of Yew’s beautiful creation.

5. Self-acceptance in a homophobic society. The gay identity

This last chapter is centered on proving, by means of a thorough analysis of the selected characters, how society proves to be homophobic, executing an incredible discursive force on any social individual, who can but accept the imposed rules on sexual identity. Some of the following characters do rebel against these prefixed ideas, while some others are so attached to a number of institutions that it is impossible for them to cease their performance. Thus, the gay identity is the main focus of this chapter, which will give rise to several questions to be answered at the end of this project.

5.1. “Just people”. Max from Martin Sherman’s *Bent*

This post-Second World War play was very well accepted in the mainstream American dramatic panorama, despite its crudity. Apart from reexamining a recent past in order to reinterpret it away from censorious heterosexuality, the play also distorts the image of the gay villain that ends up becoming the hero (De Jongh 144). But the most important feature of this play’s main character is how his private life is exposed so as to assert a homosexual identity, one that is different from the homophobic world which has shaped and limited it. In the same lines as other historic plays, *Bent* constitutes a “significant exploration of our part in a great historic oppression, and of the conditions that may promote and thwart gay love” (Sinfield 307).

Max’s development throughout the play is so notorious that it can even be stated that his characterization vary greatly not from Act One to Act Two but from one scene to the next. The Max that the audience is presented in the first scene is the gay villain, for he believes that the best expression of gayness is promiscuity. This can be sensed not only from the explicit dialogs but also because of Wolf’s naked body. Once Max’s private sphere is invaded by “The Night of the Long Knives”, a landmark for gay history (Shewey xix), Max becomes a fugitive, and begins to astray both emotionally and physically from his lover. He cannot but wonder how it is possible that society can outlaw his sexual choice, if he considers himself a product of a society that had given him the right to make that decision freely: “I was brought up to be comfortable” (Sherman 97).

Undoubtedly, the play's most shocking, outrageous moments are intelligently placed in the transportation to the concentration camp. In this overwhelming scene, Max is forced to observe how his lover is beaten up to death, establishing a first emotional link with Horst, his future spiritual, emotional, and identity leader: "If you wanna stay alive, he can't exist" (Sherman 105). Right after this traumatic event, Max is given the opportunity to show he is not a homosexual by means of raping the corpse of a teenage girl. His accepting to do so makes him become the martyr that has to "perform a brutal repression on himself" (Clum, "A Culture That Isn't Just Sexual" 180). His strategies are focused on denying his sexuality in order to stay alive. The particular use of punctuation in the dramatic texts when Max recalls what had happened to him on the train portrays him as a somewhat unstable gay individual, someone who is now as detached from sexuality as he is from sanity:

And I said, I'm not queer. And they laughed. And I said, give me a yellow star. And they said, sure, make him a Jew. He's not bent. And they laughed. They were having fun. But... I... got... my... star... (Sherman 111)

Life at the concentration camp makes Max shut down and reject any hopeful words coming out from Horst's mouth. However, this does not stop him from silently processing all that enthusiastic encouragement. Finally, Max gives up the idea that "denial is survival" (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 183) and makes love to Horst. This scene has been subject to floods of criticism, many of which praise the subtlety of the sociopolitical signification and "sobriety of the scene" (Eyre 314). In their love-making dialogs, Max accepts joining a language-driven sex act. As they cannot even look at each other, language turns into the only possible vehicle for love, presenting an interesting metaphoric reversal of how gay people are denied "the right to speak openly of their desire ... in a homophobic society" (Clum, "A Culture That Isn't Just Sexual" 178). The very fact that they can express such tender, true feelings in these brutal conditions and still stay alive makes Max realize that "love is the ultimate act of defiance" (Shewey xix) for the gay individual: "We made love. We were real. We were human ... They're not going to kill us (Sherman 129).

Nonetheless, making love is not enough for Max to accept that "sexual identity" are two terms that act as one. In other words, he acknowledges he is a homosexual, but does not want to be labeled as such due to the many social implications and prejudices linked to this sexual choice: "Queers aren't meant to love. I know. I thought I loved someone once. He worked in my father's factory. My father paid him to go away. He went" (Sherman 132). It all changes

once Horst reproaches his self-hatred, partly derived from “hi[s] losing his self-respect at the train incident” (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 184). Thus, Horst chides him:

What the hell. There are queer Nazis. And queer saints. And queer mediocrities. Just people. I really believe that ... That’s why I ended up here. That’s why I’m wearing this triangle. That’s why you should be wearing it (Sherman 141)

Bent’s resolution could not be other than a tragic ending, enacting gay oppression in the deaths of both main characters (see Appendix), thus representing a love that not only stands for the most “human struggle against a culture of death” but also depicts “the gay relationship” as “redemptive and tolerable” (Dolan, 490). From my point of view, the play’s last scene has a triple function: (1) to celebrate the individual’s self-acceptance in the triumph of gay pride, (2) to implicate that there is no social consideration for the gay identity whatsoever, hence pointing out the stillness of a homophobic society through an expansion of the Nazi walls, and (3), to create a Brechtian alienation effect²⁵ by means of light effects, as the stage directions indicate that “the light consumes the stage [a]nd *blinds* the audience” (Sherman 147, my emphasis).

While it is true that Max progresses from the stereotype of a negative understanding of the gay lifestyle (e.g. promiscuity, drugs, or the inability to show loving affection in a stable relationship) towards an educated, proud gay man able to love (Clum, *Still Acting Gay* 183), his suicide seems to undermine earlier gay optimistic liberationist ideals, for his not accepting the assimilation to the heterosexual world drives him – and therefore, the gay individual who wrestles with a homophobic environment – inevitably to death, whether social or literal.

5.2. Gay pride. Arnold from Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*

Although the historical setting of this play is rather contemporary, the society depicted in *Torch Song Trilogy* is just as hostile and virulent. The homophobic force permeates the dramatic text like an invisible dominance, only personified by Arnold’s mother in the third play of the trilogy, who curiously intends to win a verbal fight by using a notorious number of Nazi references. The three parts share their combination of elements of sitcom, camp and tragic irony in such a way that made Fierstein won a Tony Award in 1983 (Aronson 154, 197). The fact that it was very well acclaimed by both critics and audience brought about a mainstream

²⁵ As Shiach puts it, the point is “to destroy the illusion of reality and force the audience to question what is being represented”, taking characters as mere tools, “so that they can better make a considered judgement about what is being shown to them” (58).

understanding of the play as a “compassionate, if darkly funny, view of the homosexual lifestyle” (Bordman and Hirschak 623).

I argue that this trilogy should not be considered as a portrayal of gay lifestyle – if there is such –, for it is not common for the homosexual life to experience the emotional odyssey Arnold goes through. Instead, I am in favor of those critics who find an incredible profoundness in the seemingly superficiality and hilariousness of the play (Sternlicht 231), which turns out to be an “exemplary theatre designed to show the freedom of becoming rather than the stasis of being” (Bigsby 267). This means that Arnold must not be assumed as a stereotype but as a redefinition of such, due to his search for, or creation of, the gay family.

For this reason, Arnold is much more than just “a gay myth, in which femininity, overwhelming sexual appeal ... and maternal compassion are all fused in one drag queen” (De Jongh 172). Nonetheless, the arguments for considering this character a stereotype are not that extremist, as he displays a well-known camp style in gestures as well as in speech. Not only that, his allusions to Bette Davis and Blanche DuBois, together with the fact that his adopted son calls him “Ma” (Fierstein 485), clarify why mainstream Broadway took him as such. While it is true that there is a heavy feminine substance in Arnold’s characterization process, there also exists an important masculine factor. All of these aspects allow us to conceive this character as “an *homme fatale*” (De Jongh 172).

From my perspective, the most essential feature when analyzing Arnold is his unabashedly self-conception: his pride of being a homosexual. It is worth remarking this is one of the few selected characters that does not suffer a sexual identity crisis. This definitely proclaims him as the representation of the gay individual that is no longer considered a sick aberration but someone whose place in society is in a struggle with the heteronormative: “To him [his ex-lover], she’s simply living proof of his *normality*” (Fierstein 462, my emphasis). His stance is, then, against the *normal* ²⁶, meaning his actions always entail some type of rebellious maneuvers to destabilize the concept of heteronormativity. Doubtlessly, his adopting a child is the major one. Arnold, whose instincts are maternal rather than paternal (De Jongh 171), finds in the foundation of his peculiar family his life goal. After having an argument with her mother about this very same matter, her being an encapsulation of homophobia, he exclaims: “I felt like I was fighting for my life” (Fierstein 505). No wonder he utters the word

²⁶ Arnold shows throughout the trilogy a latent heterophobia, best seen at the end of the third play, *Widows and Children First!*, in which he begs his son not to mention the possibility of his being straight.

“life”, for it is only by finding a way into society that the gay individual can make sense out of such belligerent past, and therefore perpetuate and celebrate his identity in social terms instead of in traditionally sexual ones.

The trilogy unquestionably portrays the vulnerability of this character, too. Arnold appears to have no difficulties in overcoming Ed’s splitting up with him (see Appendix), but still cries at the end of the third play: “I’m not Laurel” (Fierstein 520). This intervention should, in my opinion, make critics reconsider this character not as a fairly simple one since this speech act reminds the audience that, if the proudest of all gay characters tackles gender issues, maybe the gay identity is not that well-accepted in society just yet. Similarly, it could be stated that there is a heterosexist response for Arnold in the text, enacted by his mother’s words: “You want me to change? I’m too old and I can’t. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t” (Fierstein 525). Arnold’s view, then, is not the only one presented in the trilogy, so his celebration of the gay individuality is faced and reminded of its social exclusion. It seems to be a matter of time, the author suggests, what will inevitably cause the homophobic social environment to accept this sexual identity.

In all, *Torch Song Trilogy* purports to depict how the contemporary heterosexual world is collapsing thanks to the addition of the gay individual. To do so, the heteronormative discourse is challenged, parodied, mocked, and ridiculed by giving personal and social stability to Arnold and his adopted son while the rest of the characters are taken out of their comfort zones²⁷. As a whole, the trilogy “acts a movement towards independent personhood, responsibility and community” (Sinfield 303), though without abandoning uncomfortable elements for the homophobic audience, such as effeminacy or camp. Values are relative (Sternlicht 231), as Arnold shows, and so a straight-slash-gay agreement is unavoidable. However, it will be a question of perspectives to observe Arnold’s tactics as ones seeking gay assimilation, or on the contrary, a gay supremacy over the heteronormative, turning the binary upside down.

5.3. Spinning forward. Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*

There could be no other way of finishing this end-of-degree project but by analyzing Kushner’s plays *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, which have become a paradigm of *fin de siècle* American drama (Aronson 155). The particular way in

²⁷ Arnold’s mother has to assume in a few hours that both his son and grandson are homosexuals and that they are living with her son’s ex-lover, who still has doubts about his bisexuality after having cheated on his ex-wife with Arnold’s last boyfriend.

which *Angels* interweaves the political with the personal in an evident Brechtian trend feature (Kushner, “Notes About Political Theater” 21) has allowed literary criticism to take this play’s “characters as metaphors for the gay identity” (Fisher, *The Theater of Tony Kushner. Living Past Hope* 66), as all of the male leading characters are homosexuals, though radically distinct in terms of gayness. To try to identify a single protagonist is unreasonable, for it is in “discarding the traditional single hero” that the play “furthers its critique on individualism” (Nielsen 38). For this reason, I will comment on the five gay characters that constitute the body of the play, Kushner being clearly influenced by canonic gay drama that refused stereotypes in the search for a sexual identity continuum (as dealt with in §3).

Let us start off with Prior, an extremely powerful and incisive character that can be approached by looking closely at two key quotations. The first of them is uttered in a dream-like atmosphere, at a moment in which he experiences a shared illusion with another character. While looking at himself in the mirror, his camp style and allusions to famous gay texts, such as Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), are instantaneously recognized as features of gay theater. This intertextuality, together with his “punning language” (Saddik 159), also point at the character’s postmodern outlook and playfulness: “I look like a corpse. A corpsette. Oh my queen; you know you’ve hit rock-bottom when even drag is a drag” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 19). Every time Prior is set in this type of fantastic scenario, interventions like this one exhibit how “variety, heterogeneity, unpredictability, transformations, pluralisms, [and] ambiguities” (Bigsby 421) stand at the core of this character, making him a theatrical representation of actual contrast with the arbitrarily fixed social conventions that continuously attempt to exclude the different.

The other key quotation is found at the very end of *Perestroika*, when Prior faces the audience to let them catch a glimpse of a better society (Reinelt 236) in which the gay identity is sighted as valid as the heterosexual: “We are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come” (Kushner 99). What the playwright is interested in communicating is how a reformed society can be built on the basis of a reexamination of values never accepted – or even considered – before. This is, “cultural certitudes, particularly ... politics, economic justice, religion, morality, and sex and gender” (Fisher, *Understanding Tony Kushner*) are the important arenas when developing a democratic society. This idyllic social environment is just glanced at, though assuring its future existence on the grounds of a neo-Hegelian perspective. If the world spins forward, there must be conservative as well as progressive eras, and thus the gay identity should suffer no longer:

“We can’t just stop ... motion is modernity” (Kushner, *Perestroika* 87). This is what keeps Prior, and therefore the rest of the characters, optimistically alive: the hope for an integrated community.

Louis, as Prior’s lover for a short but significant time, is staged echoing his beliefs, as it can be observed on his view of homophobia: “For us it’s not the verdict that counts, it’s the act of judgement” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 26). Nonetheless, he cannot be understood as an extension of Prior since Louis’s religion does find a way into his speech. In sharing his ex-lover’s conceptions on politics, he must endure an actual confirmation of the neo-Hegelian process as his inner and outer worlds collapse (Nielsen 41). It should not be forgotten that he is the one that places himself at the center of the storm, though. After splitting up with Prior because of his inability to “incorporate sickness into [his] sense of how things are supposed to go” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 14-5), he goes on the adventure of searching for self-knowledge. “His moral imperative is freedom” (Fisher, *Tony Kushner: New Essays* 102), an incredibly individualistic one, thus understanding any obstacle as potential objects of enslavement: “Children of the new morning ... Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan’s children ... Everybody is in the land of the free. God help us all” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 54). Louis even comes to connect sexual liberation with sexual freedom: “Inject me. I don’t care. I don’t care” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 41), again unsuccessfully. His defeat in achieving freedom is partly due to his solipsistic nature, which makes it impossible for him to emotionally connect with any other character in a successful manner. This way, his affair with Joe is based on their shared experience of how “faith represents an inflexible way of being in the world” (Civetta 205), portraying the life of spiritual, or religious, gay men as a double struggle.

Religion constitutes one of the main pillars, if not the essential one, of Joe’s characterization. His being a Mormon definitely permeates every single thing he says or does. As a matter of fact, he is only able to verbalize his sexuality in religious terms, specifically, by feeling identified with Jacob’s wrestle with an angel: “I’m... It’s me. In that struggle ... How could anyone human win, what kind of a fight is that? It’s not just ... But you can’t not lose” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 35). His characterization relies heavily on other characters. It is through his marriage with Harper that the audience can learn about his constant fight with his self-acknowledged gay identity: “I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I had, to kill it” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 27). It is through his sexual/business relationships with Roy that it can

be observed how he reacts to the American legal and procedural system to which he belongs. This is to say, his inability to face its corruption (McDonough 166). And finally, it is through his relationship with Louis that he is portrayed as a simple-minded character in extreme, who rationalizes a chaotic life experience by means of keeping a line of argumentation that would “prove his point of view to be the only one logically acceptable” (Neumann 162). As I see it, Kushner pours on this character all the negative connotations criticized in this play, being fixity, statism, and paralysis the most relevant ones.

When it comes to Roy Cohn, the semi-biographical character taken from the McCarthy era, the discussion on “the distances between sexual identities and cultural politics” (Roudané 405) comes to the foreground. This peculiar character is given one of the most quoted lines of the play, in which he exposes the troubling terms that the homophobic society makes use of in order to perpetuate heteronormative power. Roy clearly states that the “problem ... is that [we] are hung up on words, on labels, that [we] believe they mean what they seem to mean”, which makes him conclude that he is “not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man ... who fucks around with guys” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 31-2). Queer Theorist Judith Butler deals exactly with Roy’s apparently contradictory statements in her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”. In it, she insists on the instability of sexual categories when linked to gender (311), explaining that sexual identities unavoidably convey a great number of further meanings.

Roy does accept his sexuality, though he rejects being labeled as a homosexual because of his understanding of the label as one that does not suit his personality, or, in Butler’s words, his performance. Part of what it means to be gay is to be socially and politically powerless, so it is no wonder he does not feel identified as a gay man, because “without power there would be no Roy Cohn” (Nielsen 45). This character also takes vital importance in the whole of the play due to his antagonist position to the majority of the rest of the characters. His characterization is crafted in such a way that it could even be asserted that he stands as a symbol of “a decaying American culture” (McDonough 165) based on a tyrannical competition. His power is based on this very fact, and it turns out that this unfair competition is reserved to men: “I’ve had many fathers, I owe my life to them, powerful, powerful men” (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 40). I personally read this character as opposite to Prior, for Roy stands as the iconic representation of an old-fashioned closeted man. His interventions and goals are not taken seriously, and he has to live through his worst nightmares since *Millennium Approaches*

starts: he is pointed at as a homosexual, denied a promotion, hospitalized because of AIDS, treated by a black gay nurse, and eventually disbarred.

Precisely this nurse is the last character to be analyzed. Belize's name already hints at some of the characteristics this character possesses, the majority of them associated with the gender ambiguity of this name. The exaggerated use of camp on Belize's behalf places this significant character somewhat away from gender stereotypes. This is best perceived when imitating Hepburn: "Men are beasts" (Kushner, *Millennium Approaches* 45). In my opinion, to categorize Belize as a man or a woman is to make this character lose half the power. Of course, transvestism is being performed here, but further than that display of gayness, Belize makes reference to an earlier stage of gay liberation (Nielsen 46), somehow functioning as a reminder of the historic struggle of the community. Apart from this, Belize is the only character of the play that is able to observe the world and its people more objectively. The way in which this character engages with America is most significant. First, the hatred felt for the country is explicit²⁸: "I hate America" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 61). Second, Belize is able to identify Roy as the last surviving specimen of the conservatism in the country: "I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 61). And third, there is an awareness of racial implications in America: "I am trapped in a world of white people. That's *my* problem" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 59). This all does not stop Belize from understanding that the only possible weapon to fight back hatred is solidarity from the "oppressed to the oppressed ... out of a triple marginality: Belize is homosexual, a transvestite, and Afro American" (Antón Pacheco 188)²⁹. This is why Belize's tactics are strictly based on helping the rest of the characters, including Roy Cohn, who is warned about his carefully planned medical treatment, meant to disempower his political persona. In all, Belize acts as the helper, though with a harshly critical eye that envisions Heaven (or, idyllic social environment) as a place in which "race, taste and history finally overcome" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 47).

Beyond any doubt, *Angels in America* still stands as the last milestone for gay drama. Its witty and campy characters resemble other major gay plays in that the primary concern for the gay individual is the struggle for human contact, support, and love (Aronson 155), and at the same time it expands the horizons of the genre by applying the newer critical background.

²⁸ Belize's considerations on the USA push the humoristic element to satire: "You're in a hospital, you don't have any constitutional rights" (Kushner, *Perestroika* 10)

²⁹ This is a translated quotation, the original being: "Belize ... triplemente marginal porque es afroestadounidense, gay y travesti, es quien más sencillamente ha comprendido el significado de la vida ... la solidaridad que los oprimidos han de mostrar para con los oprimidos"

The aesthetic force of the play's mixed genre (Bigsby 423) does achieve a truthful representation of a threatening, chaotic, and dangerous present while glancing at a hopeful future for the gay individual. The play's titles point at the violence very much present in the past millennium, "a violence that has ... become institutionalized" (López Gándara 173) in Western societies, and which proves the inefficiency of institutional interactions with individual choices, such as the gay identity.

6. Conclusion

After having contributed with the analysis of such a wide and varied collection of characters, it is time to identify similar characteristics present in all of them, so as to reach a final conclusion. Though from different angles, all plays intend to make the social conception of the gay identity more flexible, and are aware of the importance of calling the audience's attention, hence the theatrical style, often regarded as outrageous and inappropriate. Most importantly, and as explained in §2.3, all characters are staged following an analogous characterization that relies on three spheres: the self, the partner, and the world. It is by showing how the gay individual interacts with the latter two that he is indeed defined. So, I believe it would be an excellent idea to extend this methodology on character analysis to the rest of the plays belonging to this genre.

Therefore, an evolution can be observed from *The Boys in the Band* to *Angels in America* since the former does represent the hateful stereotypes by means of which the homophobic society categorizes and simplifies the gay identity, while the latter achieves the representation of this sexual identity not as something fixed but fluid. This is, *Angels in America* does stage the many ways in which a gay individual can find himself in the continuum of gayness. Regarding content, the end of this play, commented in §5.3, is not that different to the rest of the plays here analyzed. Although it is true that Kushner's text outstands as most inspiring, all gay plays are heavily charged with an optimistic, hopeful view of a better society.

Thus, this analysis also proves how characters seek the fulfillment of the conditions for such a future, better social environment in which the gay identity would be effortlessly accepted. Apart from the deletion of stereotypes, they all point at the suppression of sexual standards. Paradoxically, the gay character claims that this sexual identity will be at peace with society once this society abandons sexual categories (i.e. homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, etc.). This would entail the elimination of homophobic expressions, such as the very words by which the individual is recognized, whether it is *homosexual*, *gay*, or *faggot*. So, the use of any of these terms on the gay individual's behalf would not be considered a political act anymore, but an unnecessary nomenclature.

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Appendix: Plots

The Boys in the Band

Set in Harold's birthday party, seven gay friends meet, some for the first time, in Michael's house. He has received a desperate call from an old college friend, Alan, straight, who apparently has had some marital argument and asks for his help, but without giving much detail. The gay world dares and shivers at the straight character at equal times, but finally explodes. Emory is subject of physical and psychological aggression by Alan, whose punch on the face reveals Michael's evil. The host proposes a game by means of which he intends to break Alan down, unsuccessfully. At the same time, Hank notices how his boyfriend, Larry, is flirting with Donald, but cannot stop him in front of Alan, to whom he thinks he must hide his sexuality because of their similar masculinity and marital status. On the background, Harold remains as the excuse for the meeting, while Cowboy incessantly shows his foolishness. Michael's game ends up in Alan finally leaving, not before knowing about everyone's sexuality. Larry and Hank reset their relationship and go upstairs to make love in a most symbolic way. Everyone then goes out the house except Michael, whose grief, solitude, and self-hatred is more than evident after failing in his malignant purpose of destabilizing Alan.

Love! Valour! Compassion!

Gregory, a respected ballet dancer, invites six gay friends to his summer house in three special days. His partner, Bobby, who is blind, is surprised in the middle of the night by Ramon's lust. His infidelity is only one of the many consequences gathering eight gay friends has. All characters feel free to address the audience whenever they feel like to, letting their inner feelings exposed. In this isolation, John, who is hated by everyone, welcomes his twin brother James. This character finds in Buzz, a camp queen, a similar understanding of life, since they both have AIDS. The purpose of Gregory's gathering is to convince his friends to dance *The Swan Lake* in drag. Despite Perry's initial opposition, all of them dance together at the end of the third act. The complex plot of this play allows for different relationships between the characters (e.g. lovers, friends, collaborators, foes, etc.), enacting tragedy and comedy almost in a parallel way.

The Normal Heart

Centered on Ned Weeks, the play stages how the Gay Men's Health Crisis Committee was founded and how it tried to tackle the AIDS issue in 1980s America. The main character

faces multiple refusals to help the American population on what it is becoming an epidemic from the medical, the political, and the social sphere. These spheres project certain discourses which are constantly questioned and blurred. As many of the play's characters suffer from the disease, the emotional relationships created between them give way to sudden bursts of self-pity, lamentation, and anger. Ned's passionate fight for a basic medical recognition on the syndrome makes him a dictator-like character who constantly tries to impose his ideas, rather than convincing the rest about them. As a direct consequence, he is rejected from the organization he himself co-founded, makes it harder for his people to speak to the mayor of the city, and argues with his brother by calling him a homophobe. Due to the deaths of many of his friends and his lover's, as well as his evident defeat on politics, his solitude and commitment with the gay community materializes in a most powerful speech demanding social visibility.

Jerker

This play's complete title is *Jerker, Or the Helping Hand: A Pornographic Elegy with Redeeming Social Value and A Hymn to the Queer Men of San Francisco in Twenty Telephone Calls, Many of Them Dirty*. Only two characters swiftly perform the rapid, vivid twenty scenes of the play, one for each telephone call. The best remedy for the distance that makes impossible any chance of their encountering is the telephone, to which they turn to over and over again, in search of some human affection in a world that is not willing to satisfy homosexual desire. The highly pornographic content of the first phone calls is slowly assuaged and so the two characters start to participate in childish fantasies. The last scenes occur even more rapidly, flash-like, not without making the audience unable to realize that J.R. cannot contact his lover because he has died from AIDS. J.R.'s final love declaration makes the play appear to be somewhat abrupt in terms of style for changing from an erotic to a pornographic, then bitter tone, to finish in the most melancholic of ways.

Jeffrey

During the height of the epidemic, this comedy's main character swears not to have any sexual relationship whatsoever for the rest of his life. His solemn vow gets complicated the moment he falls in love with a seemingly perfect man. By usually breaking the fourth wall, Jeffrey opens up and exposes his suffering because of a most interesting internal struggle. His earlier decision on celibacy is challenged, and this enables the plot to display all its powerful criticism through smart laughter. In the end, Jeffrey and his perfect lover consider that their love relationship is worth taking the risk, not before surveying all the places considered to be

central to the gay experience. Jeffrey's adventurous, epic journey reveals a common experience to the gay individual suffering from absolute panic about the possibility of contracting AIDS.

As Is

This play revolves around a gay couple, Saul and Rich, who are in charge of opening up the play with their break-up. But Rich's firm resolution is not that decisive, for he returns to Saul's arms once he contracts AIDS from his new lover. Seeking emotional support, Rich stages how the diseased are treated by the American family, doctors, and friends. The impersonality of these people's behavior leads Rich to notice the importance of the partner for the gay individual. They relive together a wide range of anecdotes and gay experiences, which are carefully selected and interconnected so as to explore the origins of the epidemic, as well as how gay people should feel about it. On a memorable scene, Rich attempts to commit suicide by taking some pills, but is prevented from doing so by Saul. This latter character is given one of the most emotional and moving monologs of all the plays selected here, which is meant to encourage both the Person With AIDS and his lover to live through the disease and overcome any difficulty with an idealistic mutual love.

A Language of Their Own

This is another play which takes a couple as the focus of the plot, but the way in which their relationship develops is unique to any other dramatic text on gay issues. The fact that both are assimilated Chinese gay individuals, one of them suffering from AIDS, makes the whole analysis really fruitful, due to the many points of view one could apply (e.g. sexual politics, race, social prejudice, etc.). It is precisely all of these factors that urge Oscar to break up with Ming. They believe they fall in love again, with other two different people, but they eventually come to realize, in an epiphany, not only the impossibility to replace the love they once had but also Oscar's inability to value their past love. Thus, their gay relationship is explored and a vast, complex web of emotional interconnections is drawn between them. Both characters lend themselves to be analyzed in a wide variety of critical angles. Oscar's final death shows both couples as dysfunctional, in social terms as in emotional ones. As a matter of fact, language is the key element that is highlighted as the one thing that is lacked by gay people, as well as Asian American. As a matter of fact, Oscar and Ming never communicate their feelings purely, or in a straight-away manner, not even in the face of death.

Bent

In the outset of the Second World War, Max considers himself a liberated gay German, who is comfortable enough with his partner as to bring home any boy he picks up at night. Once this free vision of sexuality is introduced, the play is a continuous show of shocking scenarios, dialogs, and turning points by means of which the audience's sensibility is defied. Max is forced both to remain silent while the Nazi beat their partner up to death and to penetrate and ejaculate inside the corpse of a female teenage in order to prove his virility. This allows him to wear a badge that defines him as a Jew instead of gay, which would cause him an even more problematic situation. Max's living in the extermination camp is what makes him grow his sense of self-identity, and thus fight for another gay prisoner. This new, particular lover suffers from a cold which inevitably reveals their affectional bond, for he is cured with the medicine that Max earns every time he sexually submits himself to the German general who is in control of the camp. After his lover's killing, he takes off his clothes and wears the badge that identifies him as gay, and bravely commits suicide as an act of rebellion.

Torch Song Trilogy

Arnold, an alleged drag queen has trouble in finding emotional stability with Ed, a confused bisexual who ends up splitting up with the protagonist. A year later, Arnold and Ed both have separate lives, but still think of each other. Laurel, Ed's new partner, invites Arnold and his new boyfriend, Alan, over to their house. Laurel and Ed's home, against all odds, becomes the perfect setting for healing old bruises. However, one scar is still open, and that is an undeniable preference for homosexual intimate relations on Ed's behalf. Thus, his making love to Alan makes the heterosexual couple redefine their relationship in a desperate search for a balanced, healthy love. Laurel and Ed's tactics are not successful, and so they finally break up. Ed returns to Arnold, whose life has completely changed since he and Alan visited the troubled couple some years ago. From that moment until now, Arnold has had to endure Alan's death, who was attacked and brutally killed by some homophobic youngsters in a park near their home. Arnold's intention to build up the future they had figured out comes true when his petition for having an adopted child is accepted. This way, he is given David, whose homosexuality has driven him all around the country, rejected by myriads of heterosexual couples and institutions. The three of them, Arnold, David, and Ed, work hard to make Arnold's homophobic mother believe in a completely different reality. She inevitably finds out, and this causes a tremendous fight with his son. At the end of the third play, Arnold and Ed are together

again, Arnold's mother is reconciled with her incomprehensible son, and David calms down his heterophobic father by assuring him of his homosexuality.

Angels in America

Prior, a gay man who is suffering from AIDS, receives the visit of an Angel who assures he is the new Prophet. He is told to stop causing so much social progress, and this leads Prior up to Heaven, which is shaped as San Francisco. There he speaks to the rest of the Angels and convinces them about the necessity of social upheavals. Meanwhile, Prior's boyfriend, Louis, splits up with him because of his inability to take the pressures associated to AIDS, especially the presence of blood and lesions. He eventually picks up an unknown man and has sex with him despite the contraceptive is broken, to end up in Joe's arms. Joe is a Mormon lawyer who is having great troubles with all the institutions that govern his way of living, from religion to the State and marriage. This last concern troubles him in excess, for he feels desperate about his wife, Harper, knowing about his homosexuality. She does know about it, and this makes her, together with a heavy pharmaceutical component, enter in a perpetual trance in which her reality is not only stirred but even extended and connected to Prior's. Joe's career seems to improve after falling in love with Roy Cohn, a semi-biographical character from the Reagan era. Roy also suffers from AIDS, but is incapable of accepting so, given the social labels attached to the sickness and to the supposedly only sexuality capable of being contagious. Roy's terminal health makes him stay at hospital, where he knows Belize. He is helped and finally dies, after being hunted by the spirit of Ethel Rosenberg, one of his most sounded victims. Belize, an African American transvestite, calls up Louis to carry out the Jewish funeral services for the abominable lawyer. At the end of the second play, all interconnected conflicts between the many characters stay clearly solved, and four of the characters recall the story of the Bethesda Fountain, full of hope about the future social recognition of homosexuality, as well as the disappearance of homophobia.